

The Ancestral Engagement Jewels
Were Important in One Chapter
of Life for Nelly-Lou and Sara

A Story Not Without Words

BY
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NELLY-LOU JOHNSTON was the nicest girl in Gainesville and Larry Proudfit was the nicest man and they were very nearly engaged to be married. And so things stood when Sara Stanton came to town.

Sara was twenty-five to Nelly-Lou's twenty-three—and as much like a somewhat overbearing, but lovely gardenia as Nelly-Lou was like a wild rose.

The people whom Sara came to Gainesville to visit were comparatively new, and rolling in wealth. Wythe was the name. Julia, the daughter, had gone to school with Sara, somewhere in the east, and Jimmy Wythe, the son, was an unsuccessful rival of Larry for Nelly-Lou's favor. Upon Sara's second night in Gainesville the Wythes gave a dance at the country club in Sara's honor.

At the dance most of the county was present.

"Who's the man with the girl in blue tulle?" Sara inquired of Julia Wythe after Larry and Nelly-Lou had passed along the receiving line.

"That? Oh, that's Larry Proudfit—niece man in town; going to marry the girl he's with—Nelly-Lou Johnston—daughter of old Judge Johnston."

"Is he?" inquired Sara innocently. "Do you know, I rather like his looks."

"Watch your step," whispered Julia. "Nelly-Lou has him tied and labeled." That first dance set the seal of Gainesville's emphatic approval upon Sara. When "Home, Sweet Home" was played at three in the morning, she had engagements for a week ahead in the matter of dinners and motor-rides and dances. And just here it may be noted that one of the dances was Larry's.

Which marked an epoch in Larry's life. He had taken no one but Nelly-Lou to dances since he was twenty and she seventeen.

He didn't quite know how he came to ask Sara, but Sara could have told him. He had taken her up upon one of the clubhouse verandas after a dance for a breath of air and a cigarette—and the conversation had turned, naturally enough, upon dancing.

Sara had looked up at him from under heavy lashes and said:

"It isn't dancing—with you—it's like flying. It's perfect. Just the music and the lights—and drifting through the air. You know, I almost forgot you were there. I felt like a butterfly myself—"

"You may feel as much like butterflies as you want," said Larry coolly; "but you don't want to forget that I'm here."

"I remembered, before we stopped," murmured Sara with a soft little laugh.

"Poor little fingers!" said Larry boldly. "Did I hurt 'em?" He picked up Sara's hand and kissed it with a delightful air of gallantry. Now, one of those things which a girl from the north is always slow of learning is this: That when a man from the south kisses the hand of a pretty woman, he means by it—approximately nothing.

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SARA heaved a prettily careless sigh and asked: "Do you dance a great deal?"

"Probably shall while you're here," said Larry.

"There are one or two dances next week, I know—Julia said so."

"I suppose," said Larry lazily, "I suppose you're engaged weeks ahead for all these parties?"

"Oh, not weeks!" sighed Sara. "Please don't say that at me!"

"Look, child—I'm not laughing!" said Larry, amused.

"For instance," pursued Sara, with a touch of wistfulness. "There's the Merrivell party next Tuesday night—their dinner-dance, you know—"

"Aren't you engrossed for that?"

"Oh, I dare say I shall be. Some one will ask me."

"If some one does, will you tell him you're going with me?" Larry suggested pleasantly.

Sara lifted wide, dark eyes and smiled at him.

"So glad you asked me," she said happily. "Do you know, I shall be looking forward to that party all week. You'll have to dance with me at it."

"The barbers were excited now.

WAS to the fight the other night?" said the barber, leaning over me and speaking in his confidential whisper.

"Yes," I said, "I was there."

He saw from this that I could still speak. So he laid another thick wet towel over my face before he spoke again.

"What did you think of it?" he asked.

But he had miscalculated. I could still make a faint sound through the wet towels. He laid three or four more very thick ones over my face and stood with his five finger tips pressed against my face for support. A thick steam rose about me. Through it I could hear the barbers' voice and the flick-flack of the razor as he stropped it.

"Yes, sir," he went on in his quiet professional tone, punctuated with the noise of the razor. "I know from the start Battlin' Bugs was sure to win—"flick-flack, flick-flack—"as soon as I seen him that night and seen to get away he made I know it—"flick-flack—"and just as soon as he got the jump!"

This was more than the barber at the next chair could stand.

"Him get de jump," he cried, giving an angry dash with a full brush of soap into the face of the man under him—"him get ut-dat stiff—why, boys," he said, and he turned appealingly to the eight barbers, who all rested their elbows on the customers' faces while they listened to the rising altercation; even the manicure girl, thrilled to attention, clasped tight the lumpy hand of her client in her white digits and remained motionless—"why, boys, dat lucky stiff can't no more swing a real wallop than—"

"See here," said the barber, suddenly and angrily, striking his fist emphatically on the towels that covered my face. "I'll bet you five dollars to one Battin' Bugs can slay any man in his class."

"Him slay," sneered the other, squirting a jet of blinding steam in the face of the client he was treating. "he ain't got no more punch in him than dat rug"—and he slapped a wet towel across his client's face.

"Been out of town?" he questioned. "Yes," I admitted.

"Who's been doing your work?" he asked. This question, from a barber with no reference to one's daily occupation. It means, "Who has been cutting your hair?"

I knew it was best to own up. I'd been in the wrong, and I meant to acknowledge it with perfect frankness.

"I've been shaving myself," I said. My barber stood back from me in contempt. There was a distinct sensation all down the line of barbers.

One of them threw a wet rag in a corner with a thud, and another sent a sudden squirt from an atomizer into his customer's eye as a mark of disgust.

My barber continued to look at me narrowly.

"What razor did you use?" he said. "A safety razor," I answered.

The barber had begun to dash soap over my face; but he stopped again.

"A safety razor to a barber is like a red rag to a bull."

"If it was me," he went on, beating lather into me as he spoke, "I wouldn't let one of them things near my face."

"Massage?" he said.

"No, thank you."

"Shampoo the scalp?" he whined.

"No, thanks."

"Sing the hair?" he coaxed.

"No, thanks."

The barber made one more effort.

"Say," he said in my ear, "as a thing concerning himself and me alone, 'your hair's pretty well all falling out. You'd better let me just shampoo up the scalp a bit and stop up them follicles or pretty soon you won't—'"

"No, thank you," I said, "not to day."

This was all the barber could stand.

He saw that I was just one of those miserable dead-beats who come to a barber shop merely for a shave, and who carry away the scalp and the follicles and all the barber's perquisites as if they belonged to them.

In a second he had me thrown out of the chair.

"Next," he shouted.

As I passed down the line of the barbers, I could see contempt in every face while they turned on the full latter of their revolving shampoo dashes and drowned the noise of my miserable exit in the rear of machinery.

"You're just on time, Nelly-Lou."

"The ripple and twang of the or-

"The moment of his creatures boasts two souls—
One to face the world with, one to show a woman when he loves her—
Are the others late?" asked Nelly-Lou a little nervously.

"There comes Miss Stanton now," said Larry.

And he and Nelly-Lou went together to meet Miss Stanton.

Miss Stanton greeted Nelly-Lou with extreme graciousness, Larry with possessive informality.

The three followed a waiter to a table in a far corner of the room and sat down.

"Well, Larry," said Sara sweetly, "why did you ask us so early? Half past four—that's almost indecent!"

"Who's coming?" persisted the languid inquisitor.

"Oh, just few—the usual crowd."

"I think he's very tiresome. Don't you, Miss Johnson?" said Sara, leaning over to pat Larry's sleeve with a provocative forefinger. Nelly-Lou achieved a smile. She was watching, Larry's face.

"Don't ask Nelly-Lou what she thinks of me," Larry was saying coolly. "And personally, I'm just as glad the rest of the party is late. I've got a crew to pick with you, young lady!"

"With me?" said Nelly-Lou charmingly.

"With you," said Larry pleasantly.

"What do you mean by telling Nelly-Lou all sorts of romantic nonsense and pinning it on me?" Nelly-Lou swallowed a gasp. Miss Stanton looked deeply injured.

"Nelly-Lou, what's the matter?"

"Matter with what?" asked Nelly-Lou.

They were sitting, at the time, on the wide shadowy veranda of the Johnston homestead.

"Matter with you and me," insisted Larry stubbornly. "Have I done anything to offend you, Nelly-Lou?"

"Mercy, no!" said Nelly-Lou. "Why should you think that?"

"Because—we used to be pretty good friends, didn't we?"

"Of course we were friends—aren't we still?"

"I'm dairied if I know."

"If you don't, who does?"

"I thought you might, Nelly-Lou."

"Why should I know any more than you?"

"Well, it's more or less up to the girl, isn't it?"

"I didn't know there was any difference in our friendship," said Nelly-Lou most untruthfully.

"It's all shot to pieces," said Larry bitterly. "And I thought—I was fool enough to hope—"

"Were you?" inquired Nelly-Lou in a curiously stifled voice. "Well, everybody makes at least one mistake, Larry." She was all at once swept with a trembling passion of anger, with the desire to see him suffer as she had suffered that afternoon before the revelation of his two soul-sides.

"Nelly-Lou" she called to her secret self, "be a lady!" But the adjuration was useless, lost before the storm.

"How can you be so cold?" asked Larry reproachfully.

"Perhaps I have ice-water in my veins, instead of blood," suggested Nelly-Lou, and laughed—an unpleasant little laugh.

"It doesn't matter in the least!" said Nelly-Lou icily. Her cheeks were burning.

"Yes, darn it—darn it—does matter!" said Larry. "I can't do this Romeo-in-a-balcony thing, and Sara won't be here to console me—so I don't want it reported that I can."

"You're too deliciously absurd," observed Miss Stanton.

"Tell her I didn't say it," suggested Larry, but there was quiet insistence in his laughing look.

"It must have been Jimmy."

"It was Jimmy?"

"Oh, I don't dare say it was—to you!"

"Anyhow, you were kidding about me."

Miss Stanton began to laugh, a trifle deliberately, but it grew into a cadence of uncontrollable mirth.

"You know it is too funny," she sighed at last. "He takes himself very seriously, doesn't he, Miss Johnston? Of course, it couldn't have been you, Larry, dear. Now, are you happy? And have you any more crows to pick with me? Because, if you haven't, you might run and inquire over the telephone where the rest of your very amusing party is."

"She said I said it—didn't she?" asked Larry.

"Haven't I told you?"

"You believed her, of course," said Larry. "Was like me as you knew me." Incredibly quiet and cool he sounded.

"It was not at all like you as I knew you," said Nelly-Lou, regretfully. "That's just what hurt my feelings at you. You always pretended to be such a friend of mine, Larry, and here you were, able all the time to hit like the villain in a play, and never, never doing it for me? It made me feel as though you hadn't thought about me—was attractive, and all that."

"I see!" said Larry, rising. "He, no more than any other healthy young man, enjoyed being laughed at. 'Good night, Nelly-Lou. I'm going home.'"

An earthquake could not have rocked that corner of the Johnston veranda more sickeningly.

"She said I said it—didn't she?" asked Larry.

"Did you ask us for half after 4 and the rest for 5?" suggested Miss Stanton.

"I did," said Larry.

A moment later the party began in earnest.

"Want to dance, Nelly-Lou?" asked Larry. He had stood with his hand on the back of her chair, significantly waiting while Jimmy Wythe and Sara, Julia and a man from out of town drifted off together. The music was a waltz, seductively muted.

"If the party is for Miss Stanton, you ought to be dancing with her," said Nelly-Lou. She rose, nevertheless.

"Well," said Larry, smiling. "you see, Nelly-Lou, nobody but you think the party is for her."

He held out his arms and Nelly-Lou went into them—as one naturally does at the beginning of a dance. But her hand was rigidly impersonal; she averted her face and there was no yielding in the contact of her slim shoulders with his.

Larry began to sing in a coaxing whisper while they danced: "Oh, how I want you, dear old pal o' mine!"

The music sang it and sobbed it in a variety of pleading nuances.

"Nelly-Lou," said Larry, "didn't you have any more faith than that in my—sense of humor?"

"She said you said it," said Nelly-Lou stubbornly.

"Sara's a man-eater," said Larry; he drew Nelly-Lou masterfully closer to avoid the impact of a reckless young couple behind them.

"I know," said Nelly-Lou passionately. "It was nothing at all to her!"

That quick, husky whisper went to the core of Nelly-Lou's heart. She turned her head and looked up into Larry's eyes. Her white lids dropped before what she saw there.

Deliberately he released her hand and took something from the inside pocket of his coat; deliberately he took back her hand and said softly: "Let me see the other minute!"

When she laid her left hand, palm outward, against his shoulder he slipped something upon her third finger, very quickly